

Leroy Fitzell dies of complications after heroic search effort

Written by Joseph Witham February 17, 2017



ST. GEORGE — After spending three days stuck on a remote dirt road near the Arizona strip and subsequently being rescued, 87-year-old Leroy Fitzell died Friday from complications relating to his ordeal.

Fitzell died surrounded by family at the hospital due to kidney failure, Meg McArthur, Fitzell's niece, said.

Known to go for long nature drives, Fitzell's family contacted police when he did not return home before nightfall Tuesday, St. George

Police Sgt. Dave Williams said.

Authorities listed him in NCIC, a national database for missing persons.

Washington County Search and Rescue conducted a wide search of areas throughout Southern Utah Wednesday and Thursday with no leads.

St. George Police Detective Derek Lewis was assigned to the case. A licensed pilot, Lewis took to the air on his day off and his own dime to perform a grid search by air, Williams said.

Lewis spotted a car matching Fitzell's vehicle description in the Black Rock Mountain area of Arizona, southeast of Littlefield on the Arizona strip.

He supplied coordinates to officers in an SUV and guided them to the car where they confirmed it was Fitzell's, but the man was nowhere in sight.

"It was stuck in a large mud puddle that was quite deep," Williams said.

Police found evidence at the scene that Fitzell had attempted to free the car from the mud.

Mohave County Sheriff's Office secured the scene and Mohave County Search and Rescue was dispatched to the area.

Search crews identified tracks leading from the area and located Fitzell underneath a tree approximately 125 yards up a hillside.

"He was in a bad condition at the time," Williams said. "He was

breathing and had a pulse. He was covered in mud and hypothermic and definitely needed immediate medical attention.”

He was wet and muddy and appeared to have survived the three days and two cold nights with just a soda and some crackers to eat.

Fitzell was transported by Intermountain Life Flight to Dixie Regional Medical Center in St. George for treatment.

“He just kept saying he wanted to go up ... we finally figured out he just wanted to be done,” McArthur said.

Fitzell was unable to breathe on his own and was in a large amount of pain before he succumbed to his condition.



Leroy Fitzell died after being stranded in the desert for three days. He was rescued in time to be with family at the time of his death. | Photo Courtesy of St. George Police Department, St. George News

He was surrounded by family at the time of his death.

“I really think we were just blessed to find him yesterday at that time so everyone could say their goodbyes,” McArthur said.

McArthur said the family was extremely grateful for the efforts of the many authorities involved in the search, but especially to Lewis, whose air search ultimately led them to Fitzell.

“That’s just service above and beyond,” McArthur said.

“The family is just so grateful for the love and outpouring of prayers and

boots on the ground,” McArthur said. “Just the offering of service from everyone has been overwhelming.”

Fitzell had a long career as an entertainer and educator and was well liked by all who knew him, McArthur said.

“He had no enemies, just a lovely human being.”

Fitzell had over 70 years of experience as a dancer in movies and on stage. He danced with the St. George Ballet and taught dance at Southern Utah University.

He danced with the likes of Debbie Reynolds, [whose recent death](#) McArthur said Fitzell lamented as the last of the old superstar crew with whom he once worked.

He was honored by the St. George City Council in 2013 with the St. George Arts Commission Excellence in Arts award.

Ed. note: CORRECTION: Fitzell’s car was located southeast of Littlefield on the Arizona Strip, not south of the Arizona Strip as first stated in this report. St. George Police Sgt. Dave Williams was the officer who shared information about the search and rescue of Fitzell, and not Sgt. Wade Johnson.

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